Engendering liminality:

The experience of re-enchantment in wild woman workshops

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Abstract

According to Paul Heelas, new spiritualities radicalise the expressivist strand in modernity and, hence, not only affirm modern values but also react against them. In particular, they challenge the 'bounded self' as foundational for modern being and progress. Charles Taylor, in discussing the emergence in modern times of 'the buffered self', points to three important changes: disenchantment, the loss of the complementary play between structure and anti-structure, and the replacement of the idea of cosmos with that of a neutral, mechanical universe. This article, through a detailed ethnographic study, explores how these changes are temporally counteracted in spiritual women workshops in North-West Europe focused on the trope of the 'wild woman'. Moreover, it shows that these retreats bring into being ritual spaces of liminality, which have the potential to engender experiences of re-enchantment and/or give a new sense of interpersonal and cosmic connection.

Keywords

Women's spirituality, ritual, anti-structure, bounded self, civilising process

Introduction

Sociological scholarship on the conditions of late modernity highlights the impact of detraditionalisation and the increasing focus on the individual self. In his influential study 'Self and Identity in Late Modernity', Anthony Giddens (1991) argues that the shift to identity as self-identity, presuming reflexive awareness and the development of individual life styles, is a constitutive feature of the post-traditional order of modernity. Similarly, Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002) state that individualisation is a structural characteristic of our highly differentiated societies, resulting in 'do-it-yourself biographies'. Meanwhile, instead of underlining the broadening of choice reflexive biographies might entail, they emphasise the risk and precarity with which they are to be pursued. Even more sceptical accounts highlight the obligatory and compulsive nature of modern self-determination and self-assertion (Bauman, 2000) as well as the narcissism it leads to (Lasch, 1991 [1979]).

This focus on the individualism and self-indulgence of the modern self also frames many studies on New Age spiritualities, which are held to be exemplary of modern religion as subjective and private reality (Luckman, 1967: 86). Paul Heelas (1996), however, contests this reading. Drawing on Giddens' (1991) thesis of self-reflexivity and Charles Taylor's (1989) historical analysis of the growing prominence of the self in

Western modernity, amongst others, he agrees that New Age spiritualities exemplify late modernity because of their celebration of the self. Yet by radicalising the expressivist turn, rooted in Rousseau and Romanticism (Taylor, 1989: 368-390), they also inform a reaction against the instrumental, regulatory and restrictive aspects of modernity (Heelas, 1996: 169-170). Above all, they challenge the notion of the 'bounded self' as foundational for modern being and progress (Heelas, 2008: 3) by fostering a relational subjectivism rather than an individuated one (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 97). In this view, the expressivist self that is valued in contemporary spirituality is not a solipsistic, self-absorbed one, as is often posited (Bellah et al., 2008 [1985]: 221; Bruce, 2006, 42; Taylor, 1989: 508), but a relational self able to develop intersubjective affect-laden reciprocal bonds (Heelas and Woodhead, 2005: 88; Heelas, 2008: 120).

The idea that the bounded self is constitutive of secular modernity has been particularly developed by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor opposes what he calls the 'buffered' self to a pre-modern porous self which is open and vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces (Taylor, 2007: 37-38, 300). In his view, three changes went along with the emergence of the buffered self: disenchantment, the loss of the complementary play between structure and anti-structure and the replacement of the idea of cosmos with that of a modern, neutral, mechanical universe (Taylor, 2007: 29ff). These changes were furthered and intensified by subjective changes like the rise

of disengaged reason and the development of self-control, including the intensification of a sphere of privacy and intimacy, as part of the civilising process described by Norbert Elias (1978 [1939]) (Taylor, 2007: 300). I will use this view of the emergence of the modern self as a buffered self to show how expressions of contemporary spirituality, while fitting into the paradigm of self-reflexivity and self-actualisation, also challenge key aspects of Western modernity. I will particularly focus on spiritual workshops centred on the trope of the 'wild woman'.

The workshops I have studied took place in a natural setting deliberately removed from urban, industrial or high-tech milieus. While intended for women who are fully part of contemporary Western society, these workshops aimed to help them (re)discover their inner wild woman, which they had somehow lost in their lives as modern women, as well as reconnect with the wildness of nature. 'Wildness', in the view of the conveners, referred to all that is spontaneous and unplanned – what breaks through the patterns of ordinary functioning and does not follow rational reasoning and/or imposed or interiorised social norms. In this sense, it can be seen as anti-structural, in the meaning given to it by Victor Turner (1969) as a negation of social structure. According to Taylor (2007: 51–52), in the modern world, the need for anti-structure is no longer recognised at the level of the society as a whole and in relation to its official, political-jural structure, as was the case in pre-modern society with its collective rituals of

reversal. Anti-structure, in terms of the time and space to 'drop out', has been placed in the private domain, among family and friends, in voluntary associations and in the public domains developed out of it, such as the spheres of art, music and religious life. This is also the realm where the workshops are situated. They are, as I will show, a sidestepping out of the ordinary life that can challenge participants' habitual functioning.

Besides anti-structure, Turner also uses the notion of liminality when referring to the intermediary state, induced by rituals or ritual-like events, between leaving behind ordinary social reality and reintegration into it. Since liminality is viewed in opposition to structure, it is considered as having no clear limits; Turner defines it as 'the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless' (Turner, 1967: 98). Turner's definition is not wholly negative, however. He also sees it as a realm of possibility that can give rise to new configurations (Turner, 1967: 97). In this sense, he defines it as the 'subjunctive mood' of culture – in opposition to the indicative realm of 'actual fact' – concerned with 'wish, desire, possibility or hypothesis'; a world of 'as if' (Turner, 1982: 83). This underscores the role of imagination in ritual settings, a point stressed by Bruce Kapferer (2004) in developing Turner's view on ritual. A second major concept in Turner's work is communitas, which refers to the feeling of fellowship that follows the breakdown of social structure and hierarchies in liminality, unleashing play and creativity (Turner, 1969). In this article I will employ the concept of liminality to refer to both a lack of

structure and a potential space which, being situated beyond preconceived boundaries, awakens affect and imagination and affords a new sense of togetherness. I will especially show how the workshops, as spaces of liminality, engender experiences of re-enchantment and/or give a new sense of interpersonal and cosmic connection, which entails a distancing from habitual ways of being in contemporary Western society centred around the ideal of the buffered self.

The equation of modernity with the advent of a buffered self, as exposed by Taylor, has been subject to feminist critique for not paying heed to gender differences. According to Linda Woodhead (2008a: 191), the modern ideal of the independent, self-assertive self is primarily a male ideal. Women have long been associated with other-orientedness, care and affect, and this traditional feminine ideal still persists today. It is precisely the conflict between a life for oneself and a life for others that explains, in Woodhead's view (2008b: 156-157), women's interest in alternative spiritualities. With regard to the studied workshops, the participants were mostly white, middle-class women who combined a professional job with life as a partner and/or mother. This can explain both the appeal of rediscovering a wild, authentic, intuitive femininity, which was supposedly lost upon entry into male-dominated society and why, as women who never fully belonged to this male world, a reconnection with this type of femininity seemed viable. It is crucial to note, however, that the kind of femininity sought in the

workshops, although associated with receptivity and relationality, was strongly differentiated from the traditional feminine ideal of self-sacrifice and, similarly to what Eeva Sointu and Linda Woodhead (2008) have observed, stressed female strength, worthiness and self-reliance in a field of connections to others.[1] Since I have elsewhere dealt with the theme of the development of a valued female self in the workshops through a shared re-envisioning of female power (Plancke 2020), I will focus in this article on the movement beyond the bounded, rational self as part of this development. Taken together, these papers underscore Giselle Vincett, Sonya Sharma and Kristin Aune's (2008: 7) suggestion that women's pursuit of alternative spiritualities means 'that they are not rejecting modernity as much as they are undertaking a complex series of negotiations with modern culture, constructing reciprocal forms of accommodation and resistance'. In this sense, as I will show, the movement beyond the bounded self is never a rejection or loss of the self as entity; the primacy of the self remains affirmed. Rather, there is an expansion that entails a feeling of increased connection and co-presence.

This study is part of an ongoing anthropological research project on Tantric yoga retreats for women and the potential they offer to participants in contemporary Western society to develop their female subjectivity. I have so far attended 21 three- to five-day workshops on different themes, six of which have focused on the topic of 'the

wild woman'. Since such retreats are generally only open to participants, I fully engaged in the workshops and only took notes on what I observed and experienced during the breaks and after the retreat. Besides participant observation, I also conducted in-depth interviews with workshop participants and conveners. The interviews took place at my own home or those of the interviewees and were semi-structured. My genuine involvement in the retreats created a confidential atmosphere in which interviewees readily shared their experiences and welcomed their documentation for research purposes. In order to access significant experiences, I applied Pierre Vermersch's explicitation interview technique. This included asking interviewees to single out an important moment in the retreat and, with prompting, to recall it in full detail in order to provide an in-depth description of what was important at that moment. For this article, I focus on a workshop in Belgium in which I participated three times between 2013 and 2015, and on which I conducted interviews with the two conveners and 18 participants. I mainly draw on five interviews which clearly revealed experiences of re-enchantment.[2]

After a detailed description of the proceedings of the workshop, I draw on the selected interviews to show how the three changes mentioned by Taylor as signalling the advent of modernity were sometimes overruled. I then identify various aspects of the workshops (both practical arrangements and the content of the exercises) which, by

challenging habitual modes of functioning in the contemporary West, triggered the move beyond the bounded self and worked against the civilising process as described by Elias. Finally, I highlight the role of ritual, as advocated by Kapferer in continuity with Turner's view on liminality, in generating a process of imagination that conditioned experiences of re-enchantment.

Case study of a wild woman workshop[3]

The workshop presented here as a case study was a three-day retreat that took place during summer on the property of an ecological community. The site comprised a main building and a few acres of land with a mixture of permaculture gardens, wild vegetation, trees and a small pool; it also housed some yurts and a caravan. Participants slept either in their own tents, in one of the yurts or on the wooden floor of a space in the main building in which, for the occasion, a small altar had been erected with an Indian goddess statue,[4] flowers and goddess cards. The group consisted of two workshop conveners and around 10 participants, all women, with ages ranging between 25 and 65, although most were between 35 and 45. The workshop conveners, An and Nathalie[5], were both active in the wellbeing counselling sector for individuals and groups. In organising the workshop, they drew on a range of inspirations belonging to

the broad field of contemporary spiritualities. Besides emotional body work, shamanism, paganism and goddess spirituality, Tantra was the main source of inspiration.

On the first day of the workshop, after everyone had arrived, a welcome ritual was held. We gathered barefoot in the garden within a circle of trees. After a moment of silence, attending to our breath and feeling the earth, An started playing a shamanic drum and invoked the goddesses of the four elements (earth, water, fire and air) as well as the goddess that resides in each woman. She then blessed the circle by igniting a piece of aromatic charcoal and waving it in a spiral in front of each woman with the words, 'And for your wild woman'. After this ritual opening, some free dancing and some words on how we felt, Nathalie invited us to share our answer to the question 'Where do I withhold my wild woman?' with a partner, without giving comments or judgements. Following this activity, we were divided into three groups – water, earth and fire – and each group received tasks related to their chosen element.

The afternoon was devoted to the 'kuṇḍalini exercise',[6] accompanied by music from 5Rhythms founder, Gabrielle Roth. One woman knelt on all fours, breathing continuously (i.e., without a break between inhalation and exhalation). When she felt the impulse, she started moving her hips and then her spine in an undulating way, making random sounds as they arose, and gradually came to a standing position. All

along, her partner in the exercise helped her by exerting pressure with the thumb, index and middle fingers on her sacrum. The aim of the exercise, as explained by An, was to 'find a pure, authentic energy, a primitive power' and 'to connect again with our past when we still walked on all fours, before we were civilised and had all kinds of norms'. This was followed by a creative exercise with clay prepared during the break by the earth and water women. The evening consisted of a goddess visualisation in the yurt. While seated in a meditative pose or lying down, Nathalie invited us to visualise how we passed through a hole into a huge tree, descended through its roots into the earth, met our wild goddess, gave her a gift, received one in return and then went back to the surface of the earth through the roots of the tree. The day ended with a gathering around the fire built by the fire women.

The second day started with sound improvisations in the yurt. Subsequently, some grounding and tension-release exercises in a circle outside introduced the major exercise: the lioness salutation. The aim of this exercise was to get into the sensation of being a catlike animal, expressing it through movement and sound by following spontaneous impulses in the body. The exercise took place outside in the grass. We began in a circular configuration on all fours. We first spent some time exploring on our own and then An invited us to begin interacting with each other according to the prevailing mood: affectionate, seductive, challenging or assertive. After a small break,

An and Nathalie playfully suggested there was a mud pool we might go in naked. Two of the times, this resulted in throwing mud and/or massaging each other with it; another year, in sacredly honouring our bodies: each woman went to the middle of the pool in turn while the others blessed her body by stroking it with mud.

The afternoon was set up as a space for more personal exploration of the wild woman. After a sharing circle on how we were feeling, An asked us to write down our image of the wild woman and how we could concretely express it during the workshop. Ways of living the wild woman that I observed included body painting, nakedness, massage, dance, touch, playing in the mud, improvising with instruments, creating a ritual around a fire and dressing up in unusual clothing, such as Native American-style or tiger-motif garments. The day ended with another gathering around the fire prepared by the fire women, this time in a more ritualised way. Nathalie asked us to take a small stick and throw it in the fire while stating an intention to let go of something. The thing to be released was, for instance, one's self-image as 'the nice girl' or negative, diminishing views of oneself.

The last day began with dancing to music we had brought, followed by a temple ritual for which we donned white clothes. The ritual was led by Nathalie and took place in the yurt or in a circle of trees decorated with orange, reddish and pink veils. The Indian goddess statue was removed from the altar and placed in the middle of the space, and

a previously prepared list of meditative, instrumental music from India was played in the background. We gathered in threes and took a mat or mattress, decorating it with cloths we had brought from home. Two women took on the role of priestesses, serving as a channel for the goddess. First, they made a *namaste* – a bowing gesture with the palms of the hand pressed together in front of the chest – to each other and to the third woman. They then purified the latter woman, who lied down on the mattress, by gently stroking her using a sponge and warm, perfumed water and circling her with incense. Then, by touch, words or other gestures, they conveyed the quality the woman wished to receive from the goddess (as she has communicated to them beforehand). After a final *namaste*, the roles were switched. Afterward, we went silently into the surrounding nature. The afternoon ended inside the circle of trees with some dancing, a final sharing circle and a last dance to the song 'Totally Wild and Absolutely Free' by Miten and Deva Premal.

The experience of re-enchantment

The conveners interpreted the theme of the wild woman as a relinquishing of habitual structures – both societal norms and habitual patterns in one's life. The aim of the workshop was to release the security given by the known order and go into the

unknown; its guiding principle was said to be spontaneity and the ability to feel natural impulses in the body in order to give flow to a vital energy that links the human to others and to the environment. In the interviews I conducted with participants, experiences of going beyond a closed self towards a connected self were abundant and were also those that left a deep imprint. They were often felt as uncanny and were recurrently linked with experiences that can be qualified as enchantment, as they contain the main features of such experiences as defined by Halloy and Servais (2014: 479): ontological insecurity as to the entities involved and the experience itself; uncanny feelings; an attentional focus on inner bodily and mental states; trance-like states; and a shift in perceived agency. The suspension of the ordinary way of sensing the world, characterised by a revelatory quality, and the transformative effect of the experience, pertaining to the very perception of reality, are also reported by Halloy and Servais (2014: 280) as characteristic of enchantment and were evident in several of the interviews. The following excerpt, in which Karen, recalled the *kundalini* exercise, literally shows the advent of this porous self and the ecstatic experience it caused:

> I felt all kind of things coming open. Something really happened in me. […] I felt something awakening, something old, not just sexual energy, although I also felt that, but an opening of every pore, as if every pore became receptive to feel. You don't feel that easily. That is why I

> also found it very beautiful and intimate to see how that awakened in L. [her partner in the exercise] and to witness that. […] Afterwards, we both felt so ecstatic. We started to walk and hug the trees. Really, we were totally high off ourselves, and we started dancing and gently rocking. Really, I did not need anything else, and then I arrived at the weeping willow and, really, the earth was there, I was one with the earth and the earth was there to love me. Every tree sensed differently, but it all opened up so much. I was like a flower. And L. was like that as well.

Karen refers to the opening of the pores, suggesting the breakdown of the buffered self and the advent of a more porous one. This goes along with strong ecstatic feelings through which her relationship with her partner in the exercise, as well as with the trees and the earth, is felt as responsive and mutually adjusted. The relationship she describes is remarkable in that it attributes subjectivity to nature. Nature here is not a mechanistic universe, as Taylor suggests is the case in modern consciousness, but rather a sentient cosmic being that allows for identification with it. In my interview with Elke about the clay exercise, she recounted a similar experience of erasure of the border between human and non-human, attributing the position of subject to the latter category. Elke had interpreted the exercise as a playful naked clay battle outside in the rain with a few other women in the group. Since the water hose did not work for them to clean themselves off, she had the idea to roll in the wet grass:

> That was definitely the most pleasant thing I have ever done in the garden. Rolling like that in the grass in the rain. I absolutely enjoyed that. [...] It felt fresh, but not cold. To lie in the grass and see the air, you saw the clouds, you saw all the green around you and the rain falling on you, so fresh. I really had the feeling, 'Well, that is it now to be grass'.

The importance of feeling togetherness – a sense of communitas between women and with nature, with the earth and with the materiality of things – is just as strongly apparent in the following excerpt of Anita's experience in the mud. In her case, however, it gave way to a painful reminiscence of her recent divorce and a desire for absorption and merging in order to relieve her pain:

> Rubbing each other with mud, to be with our feet in the mud, I found that enormous. The earthiness of it. The 'earthing' was very important for me. And the connectedness. To be together, not alone in that mud but together, the feeling of togetherness. At a certain moment, this enormous pain I had of my divorce, at a certain moment I only wanted to eat earth. I would have lain down and put earth in my mouth. It came really from here [shows the lower belly]. Wanting to scream and just sit in the earth. [...] I will never forget how strong that urge was. It was very strange.

Here, the desire to overcome the boundary between human beings and the environment, catalysed by the need to deal with the deep pain of separation, takes the form of a desire to incorporate oneself with the earth. The lioness salutation explicitly enjoined participants to overcome their humanness in its separation from what is natural and animal-like. This was mainly triggered by getting down on all fours. In Antoinette's experience of this position and its closeness to the earth, deep feelings of pain emerged. As in the preceding excerpt, they are connected to separation, this time in its ultimate form of death:

> If I can go in that position, then a lot comes up. […] I deeply got into my emotion. With sound. It was a part of mourning, I think. It came from very deep inside, those sounds and those cries. […] And I felt very well at that moment: I wanted to go into the ground. As children, we used to play; we made deep holes in the ground where you could stand up, and that was our home. I again had that feeling: I want to go in the ground. And I also came to death. That was good, very powerful.

Antoinette explained that after the workshop, she went to see a friend who just had received the news that she was terminally ill. She then interpreted her own mourning as a prophetic intuition giving her an understanding of the cyclical nature of life, of which death is a part. This excerpt also shows how affect-laden associations and imaginations

can be awakened by these exercises through specific sensations provided in contact with other women and with nature. The free exercise of enacting one's own wild woman particularly favoured these processes. Emma in imagining her wild woman, had the vision – which she enacted afterwards during the exercise – of standing on a mountain or hill near a tree and singing a song that spread in waves and moved the whole world. The possibility of going beyond oneself and accessing a spiritual, cosmic level was also a crucial aspect of Lucy's experience. She spoke of 'a transcendence of my own small I' and even reported that the exercise allowed her to feel her life mission:

> I had taken one of my flutes. And there, in the free air, in the free nature I just played a melody, naked. Afterwards, it was very special […]. Just making music, the sensuality of being just in your skin and the air that caresses you, and to know that others share that and to allow it for myself. Music is a very strong part of me and to be able to experience that in nature […]. It is something sacred in me. I experience it as my life mission. […] If I can put myself aside and if I can let it just flow through me, it comes from a kind of divine place.

The temple ritual most directly introduced references to the divine by invoking the goddess and those acting as priestesses. Since most participants, despite generally having been raised as Christians, did not actively practise mainstream religions, and since those involved in goddess spirituality were limited, this was definitely out of the

ordinary for most participants. For Elke, who had no religious affiliation or regular spiritual practice, it allowed for an experience of surrendering to the divine she had not yet accessed and felt uncanny:

> That ritual was very special to me. Because it was one of the first times that I was completely in service to someone else. My thinking was not there and I was just – well, it sounds bad – an empty shell in the service of someone else. Judgements or prejudices were not there at that moment. It was only: I do what I feel. At that moment it was just with my heart. I really had the feeling: the goddess who is in charge of this, I am just a means for her. And that is it. [...] I was like a part of the divine. If I say this, it sounds like, 'Oh' [said in a self-deprecating tone], but it was just like that. I had that feeling. A lot of love also. No judgement, a feeling of unity, of caring, a feeling of protecting the person who was lying there. It was very serene. No complexity. It was what it was.

After the retreat, Elke decided to regularly go into the woods to have a similar experience of cosmic belonging. This directly testifies to the letting go of a secular worldview in favour of a more enchanted one where the divine has a place. Besides the loss of an enchanted view, Taylor also attributes the loss of 'higher times', to modernity. The workshop seemed to counteract this as well. In her interview, Lucy repeatedly remarked that she had the impression of being in a totally different space and time,

‘totally out of the world’. Although the workshop only lasted three days, it seemed like weeks to her, even beyond time. With regard to the exercise of freely living the wild woman when she started playing the flute, she said she had the feeling of being in the Garden of Eden. Likewise, the temple ritual evoked a paradise-like feeling for Anita:

> I remember that at a certain moment I was there naked. There was an enclosure they had made with veils. The sheer beauty of it, with those colours, it was also such nice weather at that moment. The incredibility of ‘This is possible here. I am here just naked. And there is nothing unnatural about it’. Also the ambiguity of ‘Why is it like that, why is this only possible here?’ Once the workshop is done and you are back home, you have to get in the normal pattern again. We have no choice but to live in a society where we have to find our way. In every way, I do. This contrast. It is nearly utopian. You experience such beautiful moments that they hardly seem real. It was a bit paradise-like in those moments, that feeling.

Emma used the image of ‘a cocoon of enormous light’, making her unaware of any background noise or happenings, to describe a similar experience of being in an extraordinary time-space unconnected to the habitual passing of time and the boundedness of space.

Moving beyond the bounded self

As previously stated, the explicit aim of the workshop was to induce women to move beyond habitual patterns, as well as to access deeper power within themselves in connection with others and with the environment. Several aspects of the workshop worked towards participants' breaking with such structure and habitual patterns. First, there was no opportunity at the beginning of the workshop for participants to present themselves in terms of categorical identifications, such as profession, living situation or marital status,[7] which, as Taylor (2007: 369) suggests, is the usual way of defining oneself in modern Western society. Further, no programme was given at any time before or during the retreat. Participants have no precise ideas of what to expect. The website announcing the workshop was limited to general phrases such as 'we will let our wild and sensual nature speak', 'work with powerful rituals' and 'create sisterhood'. Moreover, for many it was the first time they had practised tantra, attended women's groups or participated in events organised by these two women. Finally, there was no time schedule with fixed slots (in terms of exact hours) for working, breaks, eating or sleeping. Taylor (2007: 59) underscores the importance of the creation of a tight, ordered and measured time environment in the modern transition from the experience of a cosmos to a mechanical universe. Indeed, in current society, people generally work

according to what is planned in their agendas; this is particularly the case for women, who often have dual work commitments, both professional and domestic.

Another practical feature of the workshop that contributed in undoing habitual modes of being was the lack of a clear space of one's own for participants, the majority of whom did not bring their own tents. The participants' luggage was stored in a shelter, where it remained without being unpacked. Each night, a bed, consisting only of a mattress, had to be made in the yurt or the main room in the building and was cleared away in the morning to make place for the day's exercises. The gradual development, from the sixteenth century onwards, of the need for privacy and an intimate space for oneself has been demonstrated by Elias (1978) as part of the civilising process in Western Europe and the concomitant development of the modern self.

Elias also highlights the increasing attention paid to hygiene and cleanliness and the rising thresholds of shame and repugnance, notably with regard to public display of basic bodily functions which are increasingly 'put behind closed doors' (Elias 1978: 189). While Elias does not offer a gendered analysis, issues of hygiene and decency with regard to bodily expressions weigh particularly on women, who, in Western society, are associated with the private as opposed to the realm of the public. During the workshop, it was explicitly announced that women were allowed to urinate freely, 'wildly', in the garden. One of the issues subject to restriction in the etiquette handbooks discussed by

Elias (1978: 129–43) specifically regards the habit of urinating anywhere. Another issue frequently evoked in the manuals is the blowing of one's nose without using a handkerchief (Elias, 1978: 143–52). During the interview, Antoinette mentioned to me that she refused the handkerchief offered to her during the lioness greeting since she felt the grass was good enough for wiping away her nasal discharge. The norm of cleanliness was defied, furthermore, during the workshop through the women's physical contact with matter and mud. The website announcing the workshop featured precisely a picture of women smeared with mud. Several of the women referred to this picture when explaining what had motivated them to sign up for the workshop.

Another transgressive aspect of the workshop was the presence of full nakedness. Elias' account of the civilising process in Western Europe highlights the increasing shame around being undressed, although the sight of total nakedness was an everyday experience up until the sixteenth century (Elias, 1978: 163). Today, nakedness or near-nakedness in female images is no longer taboo in the public sphere, but rather omnipresent. However, this is a highly erotically charged nakedness limited to women of a certain age and an often artificially obtained body type. In the workshop, nakedness was never obligatory, but was open to all and was not sexualised. Moreover, touch, bodily closeness, sustained eye contact and an uninhibited expression of one's emotions were encouraged during the exercises, whereas these actions are normally shunned in

daily life outside the strictly private sphere. In this regard, it is interesting to refer once more to Elias (1978: 237), for whom the moderation of spontaneous emotions is a key element of self-restraint as part of the civilising process.

Disturbances in ordinary ways of being were further created by deliberate changes in breathing patterns and the expression of raw sounds, for instance in the *kundalini* exercise. The position on all fours, by erasing the distinctiveness of the human self in relation to animal being, also challenged usual behaviour and further countered the civilising process, which increasingly aimed to hide the more 'animalic human activities' (Elias, 1978: 230). It is striking that the experiences induced by these exercises often dealt with basic aspects of the human condition, such as death and sexuality, and the condition of separation and/or communion with fellow human beings or with the natural environment. Hence, it seems the 'sequestration of experience' that Giddens attributes to modernity was sometimes overturned in these activities. With this notion, Giddens refers to the institutional exclusion of fundamental existential issues from social life and the concealment of phenomena like madness, death, sexuality and nature (Giddens, 1991: 156). With regard to sexuality, he notes how a separation took place from the more general and diffuse eroticism linked to aesthetics and the experience of unsocialised nature and cosmic forces (Giddens, 1991: 163). Contrary to these developments, fundamental existential issues took their full place in the workshop. As

is particularly salient in Karen's previously mentioned account, this could open access to a diffuse ecstatic passion, beyond a narrowly defined sexual feeling and in contact with cosmic forces.

The imaginal space of ritual

The ritual dimension of the workshop strongly supported its potential to engender a liminal space able to awaken hitherto unknown experiences. Turner developed his theory on anti-structure within the context of the study of ritual and the transformation it sparks. In continuity with Turner's attention to ritual's internal processes not reducible to the ordinary daily world, Kapferer defines ritual as a 'self-contained imaginal space' (Kapferer, 2004: 47). At the workshop's beginning, an explicit effort was made to delineate this kind of self-contained imaginal space. A circle was made, contained within a circle of trees; through drumming, invocation and incensing, the goddesses of the elements and the wild goddess herself were called to come into being. Even though no further content was given to these entities, a space was opened for each participant to imaginally involve herself with them. The closing of the ritual happened in the same space, aiding in the transition back to ordinary life.

In addition to these opening and closing moments, which infused the workshop with a ritual dimension, the last day contained an exercise explicitly conceived of as a ritual. An environment was purposefully created as separate from ordinary reality through the use of music, scents, candles and colourful, beautiful textiles and veils. This environment was meant to invite the divine represented by the image of the goddess and visually present in the statue; the women were seen as her priestesses, a quality evoked by donning white clothes. The absence of further specifications as to the precise nature of the goddess invoked and the priestesses, allowed participants to imaginally engage with these images according to their own needs and desires but as part of a shared endeavour. For some, like Elke, a genuine experience of meeting the divine happened, inducing a shift in agency. She no longer felt she was the one acting, but became a medium for – and part of – the goddess who was acting. This changed her own self, since she was able to feel love and serenity in a self-evident way she had not experienced before. Halloy and Servais (2014) consider a shift in agency and the transformation that accompanies it as crucial elements for experiencing enchantment. The interview with Karen further illustrates this. The earth became an acting, loving being, and she herself became like a flower, usually not seen as an agent.

In both Elke and Karen's interviews, the experience of enchantment was presented as out of the ordinary. Anita also evoked the near-incredibility, beauty and utopian

quality of the temple ritual. Halloy and Servais (2004: 498) suggest that for enchantment to occur, there must be a blockage of ordinary experiences, which then releases the subjects' associative resources and allows for the creation of new and out-of-the-ordinary embodied meanings. This is made possible by what they label as a 'technology of enchantment', 'an in-between space of practice, neither totally material, nor totally subjective within which the connection between inner life (imagination, expectations and dispositions) and outer situation (a social and material environment) is made possible' (Halloy and Servais, 2004: 496). This notion is useful in expanding our view on liminality as a condition for enchantment beyond its dimension of anti-structure towards its literal sense of in-betweenness, applying it not only to a space and the actions happening in that space, but also to the situation of the people who link their subjective experiences to the surrounding world in non-habitual ways. Antoinette, for instance, described how the unusually strong emotion triggered by her position on all fours on the earth awakened associations with her childhood and the unexpected theme of death. Later, faced with the illness of her friend, these associations became particularly meaningful and led her to identify with the female prophet Cassandra. In this case, non-ordinary bodily experiences connected with an imaginative process that continued after the workshop. This example also shows the importance of what Halloy and Servais call perceptual attractors – i.e. perceptual saliences endowed with great

evocative potential and strong emotional resonance – in bringing about this connection. The earth and the mud in the workshop functioned as such perceptual attractors. However, I would like to emphasise the importance of bodily positions and techniques in complement to such perceptual attractors. It is because the position on all fours is adopted that the earth becomes so relevant. Similarly, in Karen's testimony of the *kundalini* exercise, the breathing pattern, in conjunction with the rhythmic hip and spine movements, created an ecstatic state, opening the body towards the environment with its specific features and unleashing the imaginary of being loved and becoming like a flower.

Conclusion

According to some authors, the generation of spaces of liminality and enchantment that make individuals connect beyond their bounded selves is a typical phenomenon in our contemporary late modern/postmodern society. In his book *The Reenchantment of the World* (2007), Michel Maffesoli states that contemporary Western society is currently undergoing a deep transformation in which the control of a strong and confident self is no longer the norm. He evokes 'a return of mystery' (2007: 79), of 'primitive forces' (2007: 102), sensed in the presence of a 'vitalist impulsion that links up the material and

the spiritual' (2007: 41) and a 'shift from rationalism to sensualism' (2007: 105). While these characteristics fit the described workshops, Maffesoli also stresses the fusional dimension of the desired atmosphere (2007: 107). In his book *The Time of the Tribes* (1988), mass society is presented as that which allows a move beyond individualism. However, in the wild woman workshops I have discussed in this article, the self does not merge with the other, although it becomes porous and feels acted upon by the other. There is no complete loss of individuality as occurs in crowd phenomena. Rather than a 'fusional communion' (Maffesoli, 2007: 84), the workshop produces communitas in Turner's sense: there is no fusion, and individual distinctiveness is preserved (Turner, 1982: 45–46). An expansion of the self seems to be attained instead. This also means that there is no search for a tribal, communal identity, as evident in some of the examples given by Maffesoli, but that the goal of individual self-actualisation remains central, albeit within and precisely because of an openness to relational connectivity.

In a similar refutation of the disenchantment thesis, in her monograph *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), Jane Bennett discusses hybridisation, bureaucratic complexity, commodities and technology as modern sites that have the power to enchant. Likewise, Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman (2010) discuss the digital as a site for the sacred, juxtaposing it with the role of the self in new spiritualities. Remarkably, in both books, enchantment produced by these modern phenomena is strongly linked to

magic. This persistence of magic is used as an argument to contradict Weber's paradigmatic statement that the reason for disenchantment in the modern world is the possibility of controlling everything through rational calculation, which, in his view, discards the need for magic (Weber, 2004 [1917]: 13). However, one can question if enchantment is necessarily linked to magic as an experience of exerting control, on the one hand, and being controlled, on the other. The shift of agency, mentioned by Halloy and Servais as one of the characteristics of enchantment, can engender a feeling that control is taken by other beings or things than oneself, but it can also lead to feelings of surrender. The latter seems to be the case in the workshops that were studied here. In this sense, these workshops do not validate Andrew Dawson's view that new spirituality champions a 'cosmically-aggrandized self', entailing a 'conflation of self-knowledge with universal comprehension and self-governance with cosmic mastery' (Dawson, 2011: 310). Hence, I advance that taking into account such distinctions – firstly, of fusion as merging of the self vs. expansion of the self and, secondly, of magic as control vs. surrender – can contribute in evaluating the type of enchantment brought about by new spiritual practices. A gendered analysis can be especially fruitful in this regard. Sointu and Woodhead (2008: 267), noting the absence in female-dominated holistic spiritualities of a desire to dissolve individuality into oneness, as is characteristic of male Romanticism, suggest that this difference is gendered. A similar gender-sensitive

approach might help to illuminate the distinction between surrender and control as part of experiences of re-enchantment.

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[1] The theme of celebrating femininity and affirming female worthiness has been vital to the development of women's spirituality and thealogy in the United States (Eller, 1993; Raphael, 1996). Carol Christ (1979) has famously argued that the reference to a goddess is necessary for women in order to identify with and cultivate female worthiness. Ethnographic studies – both in the US but also in Western Europe and other Anglophone countries – have further highlighted the transformational potential of the collective

celebration of female power in contemporary women's spirituality (Salomonsen, 2002; Rountree, 2004; Coleman, 2009; Trulsson, 2010; Fedele, 2013; Longman, 2018).

[2] A substantial number of other interviews dealt with the topic of the development of a valued female self and a sense of connection among women, which also entails a letting go of or renegotiation of dominant gender representations. Excerpts of these interviews can be found in Plancke 2020. For some of the interviewees, the main focus of conversation was the therapeutic effects of the workshop, which stemmed from the space it afforded for the expression of emotions.

[3] While using similar imagery and having similar aims, workshops with the wild woman as their theme can be organised in very different ways according to the inspiration of their conveners. In another tantric- and shamanic-inspired wild woman workshop I participated in, the main activity involved a sweat lodge modelled on Native American traditions and conceived of as the womb of Mother Nature. We were invited 'to give to her our stuck emotions and patterns' and 'to rejuvenate with the elements' by rubbing ourselves with the earth of the lodge. In a final exercise meant to further induce transformation, we were invited to go successively in small groups to a nearby pool to leave behind what we deemed necessary, to the garden in order to ask the help of the nature spirits, and to an adjoining lake where we could make a representation of our *yoni* (Sanskrit for female genitalia) with natural materials as an expression of our sacred femininity. The second part of this exercise particularly induced experiences of enchantment: one woman reported, for instance, that she felt how a tree with his branches waved towards her, and another described how, leaning on a strong tree, she suddenly had a vision of a circle of women protecting her and heard a voice that said, 'Embrace yourself.'

[4] Specifically, it was a statue of the goddess Parvati. However, this was not mentioned in the workshop. The statue was rather used as a symbol for a generic goddess.

[5] All names used are pseudonyms.

[6] The concept of *kundalini* refers to an energy that lies at the bottom of the spine and can rise up like a snake along the different energy centres, called *chakras*.

[7] This also explains why I do not present the interviewees in this way.